

ONE CROWDED HOUR

I

JEFF RANNEY lived on the road from East Harbor to Fraternity, some eight miles from the bay. He was, at the period of which I write, a man fifty-seven years old, and his life had been as completely uneventful as life can be. He had never had an adventure, had never suffered a catastrophe, had never achieved any great thing, had never even been called upon to endure a particularly poignant grief. He was born in the house where he still lived and save for one trip to Portland had never crossed the county line. He married the daughter of a man whose farm lay on the other side of Fraternity. She was not particularly pretty at any time; and he had never any passion for her, though he had always liked her well enough, and had always been kind. His father and mother lived till he was in his forties, then died peaceably in their beds. He had been a child of their later years, and before they died they had become almost completely helpless, so that he felt it was time for them to go. He and his wife had three children, all of whom grew to maturity. The oldest, a girl, married an East Harbor boy who later moved to Augusta; the other two, boys, went to Augusta to work in a factory there, pre-

ferring the ordered hours of confined toil to the long and irregular tasks upon the farm.

Now and then Jeff's wife departed to visit her daughter, leaving him to keep bachelor hall alone. He managed comfortably enough; his life, then as always, followed a well-ordered and familiar routine. He rose at daylight, cared for his stock, made his own breakfast, did whatever tasks lay before him for the day, finished his chores before cooking supper at night, washed the dishes, read the evening paper till he fell asleep in his chair, and then went to bed. Now and then in the spring and summer months he found time to catch a mess of trout; now and then in the fall or winter he shot a partridge or a rabbit. When there was a circus in East Harbor, or a fair, he went to town for the day. When there was a dance in the Grange Hall he and his wife had used to go; but they had long since ceased these frivolities.

Jeff's farm was well kept; he had a profitable orchard, his cows were of good stock. When the price of feed made the enterprise worth while he raised a few pigs. There was no mortgage on the farm, his taxes were paid, he owed no bills, his buildings were in good condition, he owned a secondhand automobile and a piano, and he had some few hundred dollars in the bank. It is fair to say that by the standards of the community in which he lived he was a prosperous man. He was also a just man, and he had a native sense and wit which his neighbors respected.

One November day, some years before this

time of which I propose to write, he woke early and looked from his kitchen window and saw a deer feeding on the windfalls in his orchard. He shot the animal through the open window; and the spike horns, still attached to a fragment of the skull, were kept on the marble-topped table in the parlor of the farmhouse. The shooting of this deer was the most exciting, the most interesting thing that had ever happened to Jeff until that series of incidents in which romance and drama were so absorbingly mingled, and which is to be here set down.

It was a day in October. He had planned to go down into his woodlot and manufacture stove wood, to be stored for use during the winter that was still twelve months away. But when he awoke in the morning a cold rain was lashing his window, and a glance at the sky assured him the rain would continue all that day. He decided to postpone the outdoor task. A few errands in town wanted doing, so he put before his animals sufficient water for their needs till night, threw a thing or two into the tonneau of his car, secured the curtains, cranked the engine and started for East Harbor. Since the road was muddy and somewhat rutted, and he had no chains, it was necessary for him to drive slowly; and his late start made it almost noon when he slid down the steep and muddy hill into the town. He parked his car at an angle in the middle of the street and went to the restaurant presided over by Bob Bumpass for his midday meal. Eating at a restaurant on his trips to town was one of the things Jeff accounted luxuries.

Bob, fat and amiable as a Mine Host out of Dickens, asked Jeff what he wanted; and Jeff ordered Regular Dinner Number Three: Vegetable soup, fried haddock, pie and coffee; thirty-five cents. Not till he had given his order did Jeff perceive that a certain excitement was in the air.

There were two other customers having lunch near where he sat. One was Dolph Bullen, whose haberdashery was among the most prosperous of East Harbor mercantile establishments; the other was the chief of police, Sam Gallop, a wordy man. Bob Bumpass, having taken Jeff's order and served his soup, leaned against the counter to talk with these two men. Jeff perceived that Sam was telling over again a story that had evidently been told before.

"Yes, sir," said Sam, "he came right along when I took a hold of him. And he had the necklace in a kind of a leather case in his pocket the whole time."

"You took him right off the Boston boat, didn't you?" Dolph asked.

"Yep," said Sam. "Right out of his state-room. He had his suitcase open on the bunk when I knocked on the door. I didn't wait for him to let me in. Just opened her right up and went in; and he looked at me kind of impudent; and he says, 'Hullo,' he says. 'What's the matter?' Cool as you want."

"He come in here one day this summer, when the yacht was in here," Bob commented. "I kind of liked his looks."

Sam shook his head ponderously. "Them's the worst kind. But he didn't fool me."

"Name's Gardner, isn't it?" Dolph asked.

Bob nodded. "Frank Gardner. He's worked for old Viles for six-seven years, he said."

The chief of police was not willing that his part in the affair should be forgotten. He was a round-faced, bald, easy-going man; but he knew his rights, knew that in this drama which had been played he had a leading rôle.

"I says to him, 'Matter enough,' " he continued importantly. " 'I got a warrant for you,' I says. And he asked me what for; and I told him for stealing Mrs. Viles' jewels. He got red enough at that, and mad looking, I'll tell you. And he started to say something. But I shut him up. 'You can tell that to someone else,' I says. 'My job's to take you up to jail.' Then he asked who swore out the warrant; and I told him old Viles did; and at that he shut up like a clam, and snapped his suitcase shut, and came along. I found the things when I went through his clothes, up't the jail."

He had more to tell, and when Bob Bumpass had brought Jeff his fried haddock and resumed his place as auditor Sam took up the telling. How Leander Viles had come to him, demanding the arrest of his secretary; how he had insisted that the millionaire swear out a warrant; how incensed Viles had become at this insistence.

"I'll tell you," said Sam emphatically, "he got right purple, till I thought the man'd burst; and he sort of fell down in a chair, grabbing at his chest; and then he got white as can be."

Dolph nodded. "Men like him, big and fat, and full of whisky all the time—they go that way. He's got a temper too. Some day when he's good and mad that heart of his will crack on him."

Their talk continued, and Jeff continued to listen. In any issue it is instinctive for mankind to take sides. Dolph and Bob Bumpass were inclined to think a mistake had been made. "I don't believe he aimed to steal that necklace at all," said Bob; and Jeff found himself agreeing with the restaurant man. The three were still discussing the matter when Jeff finished his pie, paid his score and went his way.

His errands kept him busy all that afternoon. An ax handle, two or three pounds of nails, four feet of strap iron and a box of shells from the hardware store; a pair of overalls from Dolph Bullen; oatmeal, coffee, sugar and salt from the grocer; a bag of feed from the hay and grain market at the foot of the street. These errands were attended with much casual conversation, chiefly concerned with the arrest of the jewel thief. Late in the afternoon Jeff sought out Ed Whalen, who dealt in coal and wood, and made a deal by which Ed would buy from him a dozen cords of stove wood, to be delivered while snow was on the ground. Ed's office was near the water front; and when Jeff came out he perceived the Viles yacht at her anchorage a little above the steamboat wharf. Jeff studied the craft for a while admiringly, and he wondered how much she had cost. "As much as my whole farm," he guessed. "Or mebbe more."

Night was coming swiftly; the lights aboard the yacht were turned on while he stood there, and her portholes appeared like round and luminous eyes. He could dimly see a sailor or two, in oilskins, under the deck lamps. Rain was still falling, cold and implacable. "Guess the folks that live on her are keeping dry, inside," he hazarded. He tried to picture to himself their manner of life, so different from his own, as he went back up the hill toward where he had left his car.

A farmer from Winterport, whom he had not seen for years, halted him on the corner above Dolph's store, and they talked together for a space in the shelter of the entrance to the bank. A whistle down the harbor announced the coming of the Boston boat; and before they separated another whistle told of her departure. Then Jeff had trouble cranking his car. He had forgotten to cover the hood, and the ignition wires and plugs were wet. One cylinder caught at last; and then another; and finally all four. He had already loaded in his purchases on the floor and seat of the tonneau. The bag of feed lay along the seat.

The Winterport man had reported that the steamship line would make a new rate for apples by the barrel to Boston that fall; and Jeff decided to go down to the wharf and make inquiries. He parked his car on the edge of the wharf, in the lee of the freight sheds, and this time threw an old rubber blanket over the hood to keep the plugs dry, before turning toward the office. With the departure of the boat, business hereabouts was done for the day; and save for a

light in the office, and another on the pier toward shore, the wharf was dark. Jeff's errand occupied some ten minutes' time; and while he was inside a fiercer squall of rain burst over the harbor. He could hear the water drumming on the roof.

When the squall had passed he returned to his car and took the blanket off the hood and threw it into the dark cavern of the tonneau, then cranked the engine and turned around and started home. His lights, run from the magneto, were dim and uncertain; his attention was all upon the road. The car skidded and slid and slued and bumped; but it came to no disaster. He drove into his own barn toward seven o'clock in the evening, and left his purchases untouched while he went into the house to change into overalls, so that he might do his chores.

When he came back into the barn he saw someone standing motionless beside the machine. He lifted the lantern which he carried, so that its light flooded the still figure, and perceived that the person who stood there, facing him, was a woman.

II

This woman, in these surroundings, was an amazing apparition. Against the background of his old hayrick, still half full of hay, Jeff saw her outlined. She wore a sailor's oilskin coat, buttoned about her throat; and beneath the skirts of the draggled coat he glimpsed slim silk-clad ankles and badly soiled white satin pumps. She

wore no hat; her hair was wet and all awry; and there was a thin streak of blood from a scratch upon her temple that had trickled down across the bridge of her nose in a slanting direction. Yet in spite of these difficulties he perceived that she was very beautiful.

At sight of her Jeff had stopped in his tracks and still stood motionless with surprise, the lantern in his lifted hand. The woman's white fingers fumbled nervously at the fastenings of the oilskin coat she wore; she waited for a moment in silence; but when he did not speak she nodded in an uneasy little way and stammeringly said to him, "Good evening!" Her voice was full and throaty and pleasantly modulated.

Jeff replied, "Howdo!"

She began to speak very rapidly.

"You're probably wondering how I came here. I was in your car. On the floor of the back seat. Almost crushed. That big bag fell off the seat on top of me when you hit that terrible bump. It banged my head down on a piece of iron. I'm afraid it has bled a little. I was almost smothered. The road was so rough."

She was panting as though she had run a race; and Jeff watched her steadfastly for a moment, and then, for sheer relief from his astonishment, gripped the commonplace with both hands.

"You better come in the house and wash up," he told her slowly, "and get warm. I guess you're kind of wet."

She nodded. "Yes. I'd like that. I'd like to do that."

He perceived that she was fighting for self-control, putting down the revolt of jangling nerves.

"Come through here, ma'am," he bade her, and led the way through the woodshed and into the kitchen. There he set his lantern on the table and brought fresh water from the pump. "I've been away since morning," he explained. "The water in the tank is cold. You want to wait till I heat some up?"

She shook her head. "This will do finely."

He went through into the bedroom and returned with a heavy porcelain bowl, which he set in the sink, removing the granite-ware wash-basin. The woman had sunk down limply in a chair beside the table. Jeff, careful not to distress her by his scrutiny, unwrapped a fresh bar of soap, brought out a clean towel. Then with half a dozen motions he threw shavings and bits of kindling into the stove, touched a match to them, laid a stick or two of hardwood atop. "That'll warm the kitchen up pretty quick," he told her. He understood that she wished to be alone, yet was not sure what he should do. At last he said awkwardly, "I'll be doing the chores," and lighted a lamp for her, then took the lantern and departed through the shed again.

When he had gone only a few steps he stopped, considered, then returned and knocked upon the door through which he had come out. She bade him enter; and when he did so he found her on her feet, unfastening the long black coat.

"You could go into the bedroom," he said tentatively.

She shook her head, smiling gratefully. "I'm sure this is fine. But I would like a comb."

"I'll get my wife's for you," he replied; and brought it to her. Mrs. Ranney was a good housekeeper; the comb was as clean as new. "Would there be anything else?" he asked when she had thanked him for it.

"No. But you're very kind to me."

"I'll get the chores done," he replied uncomfortably, and this time departed in good earnest to the barn.

When he had fed and watered the stock, finding a relief in the familiar routine, he removed his purchases from the car. Saw where the woman had crouched on the floor. The rubber blanket which he had thrown in at the wharf must have fallen across her back; the heavy sack of feed might well have crushed her. "Lucky she wa'n't worse hurt," he told himself. He was full of speculations, full of questions, half dazed with wonder. Women of such a sort as this were as though they lived in another world. Yet she was in his kitchen now.

It was necessary for him to go back to the house to get the milking pails. Again he knocked upon the door, and the woman bade him come in. She had laid aside the oilskins; he was not able at once to understand just what it was she wore. A dress, but of a sort unfamiliar to his eyes. He had seen magazine pictures of such things. An evening gown, décolleté. Her hair was loose in a warm cloud about her smooth shoulders, and she was leaning above the stove.

"I'm sorry," she apologized, flushing with some confusion. "I'm trying to get it dry."

He would have backed out of the kitchen. "I'm not in a hurry, ma'am."

But she cried warmly, "No, no, it's all right. Come in."

"I come to get the milk pails," he explained. "I scalded them out this morning." He took them from the draining board at one end of the sink. "I'll go milk now."

She asked diffidently, "Can't I be starting supper while you're doing that?"

Jeff smiled faintly. "I'm used to cooking. I know where the things are."

"I can cook," she assured him. "What are we going to have for supper?" She was beginning to see some humor in the situation.

"Why I just figured to scramble some eggs, and make coffee," Jeff confessed. "The things are in the pantry, in through the dining room," he added.

"I'll have supper all ready when you come back," she promised.

He said reluctantly, "Well, all right," and left her there.

When he returned, half an hour later, he found her, her hair in a loose braid, wearing one of his wife's aprons, busy about the kitchen table. "I've everything ready," she told him, "but I waited, so that things would be nice and hot."

"I got to separate the milk first," he explained.

She nodded and, while he performed that operation, busied herself with egg beater and mixing

bowl. He took the cream down cellar, set the skim milk in the shed for his hogs. When he had washed his hands and face she summoned him to supper in the dining room. She had made an omelet and toast, and her coffee was better than his. He ate with the silent intentness of a hungry man. Afterward she insisted on washing the dishes, while he read, fitfully enough, yet with an appearance of absorption, the paper that had been left that afternoon in the mail box before the door. There was something grotesquely domestic in the situation, and Jeff's pulses were pounding with wonder at it all.

He had asked the woman no single question. There were a thousand questions he desired to ask, but an innate delicacy restrained him. The glamour of the hour had dazed this man; his senses were confused. There was an unreality about the whole experience. The dishes, rattling in the sink, sounded no differently than when his wife washed them. The illusion that it was his wife who had come home in this guise had for a moment dominion over him. The lines of newspaper print staggered and swam before his inattentive eyes. He wondered, wondered, wondered. But he asked no question of his guest.

When she had finished her self-appointed task and come into the dining room where he was sitting she seemed to expect a catechism; but Jeff kept his eyes upon his paper, as a man clings to a safe anchorage, till at last she was forced to speak.

"I've been expecting you to question me," she said uncertainly.

Jeff looked up at her and then found some reassurance in the fact that the silence was thus broken. "I've been expecting you'd tell me without asking," he said, smiling faintly at her.

"I ought to," she nodded. "But there's so much to tell; and it must sound so incredible to you. I hid in your car at the wharf, blindly, not knowing who you were. I had to get away; wanted to get away. Anywhere. To hide. For a little while. I can pay you." She spoke uncertainly, unwilling to give offense.

Jeff shook his head good-humoredly. "I don't run a boarding house, ma'am."

"I have to find some place where I can stay."

He was thoughtfully silent for a little, then asked, "How long?"

"I don't know. Perhaps only a little while."

"I guess you can stay here a while," he said.

"You spoke of your wife?" she suggested.

"She's visiting my daughter, over in Augusta," Jeff explained. "Won't be back for a week anyways. I reckon it'd be easier for you if she was here; but you're welcome anyways."

She looked down helplessly at the gown she wore. "It was a mad thing to do," she whispered, half to herself. Jeff guessed what she was thinking.

"I reckon you could wear some of my wife's things," he suggested.

"Have you room for me?"

There were two bedrooms on the ground floor of the farmhouse; but he thought she would prefer a measure of isolation. "I can make the bed in the room upstairs," he replied.

"Won't your neighbors be surprised that I am here?"

Jeff considered that for a long time in silence, till she began to be afraid the obstacle was insuperable. Then his eyes lighted with recollection, and he said slowly, "My brother moved to California and married there, and his girl has been talking about coming to see us. We can let on you're her."

She cried with sudden friendly warmth in her tones, "You're ever so kind to me. I appreciate it. Your taking me in so unquestioningly."

"That's all right," he told her.

"I'm going to take you at your word," she exclaimed. "I'm going to stay."

III

Jeff Ranney was a man habituated to routine; he fell naturally into a regular way of doing even irregular things. The next morning his life was on the surface as it had always been. He rose to his chores, returned to his breakfast, went into the woodlot and set about the task he had postponed the day before. The woman cooked breakfast and did the work about the kitchen that his wife might have done. It would have been easy for any outsider to accept as fact her pretended status as Jeff's niece from California.

But Jeff was not deceived by the apparent normality of this new existence. The man was immensely curious about her, absorbed in the mystery which she personified. His thoughts all that day were full of conjectures, full of hypoth-

eses, formed and as quickly thrown away. One guess he clung to as probable fact. It seemed to him certain she had come ashore from that yacht which he had seen lying in East Harbor the night before; had come ashore as one who flees. But to the questions who she might be and why she had fled, he found a thousand answers and accepted none of them.

The question of her identity was solved that night, for on the first page of his Boston paper a headline caught his eye. It read thus:

MILLIONAIRE VILES'
WIFE IS A SUICIDE

His eyes moved down the closely printed column, intent on each word. Save for journalistic padding the first paragraph told the story:

EAST HARBOR, ME., Oct. 18—Lucia Viles, wife of Leander Viles, the millionaire banker, committed suicide here last night by drowning. She left the Viles' yacht, which is anchored in the harbor, in a small rowboat, at a moment when a heavy squall of rain had driven the crew to shelter; and it is presumed that she threw herself into the water as soon as she had reached a sufficient distance so that she would not be seen. The tide was running out; and the rowboat was picked up by an incoming fisherman early this morning, down below the bell buoy, three miles from the yacht's anchorage. The body has not been recovered. Mr. Viles, millionaire husband of the dead woman, said to-day that she had been subject to fits of melancholy for some time.

Jeff read this while his guest was washing the dishes after supper. She had thrown herself zealously into these household tasks, as though

her overstrained nerves found relief in them. When she came into the dining room afterward he laid the paper down in such a manner that she must see the headline which had caught his eye.

She did see it, caught up the paper, read hurriedly, looked up when she was done, to find him watching her.

"You've read it?" she asked. He nodded. "I didn't think they'd have it in the papers," she cried, as though appalled at what she had done.

"Guess you didn't make your boat fast when you landed," Jeff suggested.

She shook her head. "No. I pushed it off. I hoped they would think this."

He studied her, surprised and thoughtful. "Won't your husband be kind of worried about you?" he suggested mildly, and was startled at the fierce anger behind her reply.

"I want him to be worried! Oh, I want him to be tortured!" she cried, and became absorbed once more in that which was printed on the page before her. "The body has not been recovered," she read aloud after a moment; and with a quick change of mood laughed at him, shuddering faintly. "It does give me a creepy feeling," she said.

"I should think it might," Jeff assented mildly. "Yes, I should think it would."

She was wearing a gingham dress belonging to his wife, which he had found at her request. Now, sitting across the table from him, she began to tremble and to laugh in nervous bursts of sound.

Jeff asked, "What's the matter? What you laughing at?"

"I can't stop," she told him helplessly. "It just strikes me as funny. I can't help laughing. If I didn't laugh I should cry. They think I'm dead. Dead!" The word was high pitched, almost like a scream.

Jeff had seen feminine hysteria before; he said sternly, "You got to stop. Now you be still."

The woman controlled herself at once, nodding reassuringly. "Yes, I'll be still. I will be still," she promised. "You won't let them find me here, will you? You won't let them know I'm here?"

"Andy Wattles stopped here this morning, in the truck," Jeff answered. "I told him you'd come. He'd heard me say you was thinking of coming. It was safest to tell him."

"But I wasn't thinking of coming!" she cried, appalled.

"My brother's girl from California was," he reminded her; and she nodded over and over, as a child nods, to show her understanding and her acquiescence. Her trembling had ceased; her fright was passing. She went to bed at last, somewhat reassured.

But the paper next day, in even larger headlines, announced that doubt was cast upon the theory that she was a suicide.

"Mr. Viles," the reporter wrote, "said to-day he thought it possible his wife might have become temporarily insane; that she was subject to hours of extreme nervous depression. It is known that she took a considerable sum of money from a safe in her cabin before she left

the yacht. It is possible that she went ashore upon some errand and was assaulted and robbed. The three possibilities which the police of East Harbor are considering are suicide, robbery and murder, or an insane flight." Jeff smiled at the picture of Sam Gallop, the "police of East Harbor," considering anything. "In order to enlist every possible helper in the search for the missing woman," the reporter added, "Mr. Viles has offered a reward of a thousand dollars for her body or of ten thousand for information that will lead to her discovery alive."

The woman, when she read this, shivered with dread. "They will find me," she told Jeff wearily. "Oh, I hoped they would believe me dead."

"I dunno as they'll find you," Jeff argued. "They're not apt to look out this way. They're more likely to think you headed for Boston or somewheres."

"It's hopeless," she insisted. "I think you'd better go tell them where I am, and get the money. The ten thousand dollars. Some good will come out of it, that way. I'd like you to have the money. You've been kind to me."

The man laughed reassuringly. "Shucks, ma'am," he said. "What would I do with a lot of money like that? It's no good except to buy things with, and I've got more things than I can take care of now. Don't you fret yourself. They ain't going to find you, ma'am."

"Everyone knows I'm here. Those women who came to-day—" She moved her hands drearily. "Someone will tell."

Jeff shook his head. "No, they won't. That

was Will Bissell's wife and Mrs. McAusland. They heard from the store that you was here; and they'd heard my wife say you was coming."

"Oh, they must have seen that I was—" She paused, unwilling to hurt him.

"Different from us folks?" he asked, smiling at her understandingly. "Well, California folks are different from people around here. They'd have thought it was funny if you was like us."

"And my wearing your wife's dress."

"I told 'em your trunk was lost. You had to have something to work around the house in."

She was, in the end, unwillingly persuaded to a more hopeful point of view. But when she had gone up the stairs to her room Jeff sat for a long time, turning the newspaper in his hands, reading over and over that which was written there. She was so beautiful, so much more beautiful than anyone he had ever seen; and the gown she wore when she came to the farm had stamped itself upon his visual memory as a part of her beauty. That a reward of ten thousand dollars should have been offered for her discovery did not surprise Jeff; though it added to the glamour which cloaked her in his eyes.

"She's worth more," he told himself softly. "If she was mine I'd give a hundred times that much to get her back again." And he thought of this husband of hers, whom she wished to torture, and wondered what he had done to her, and hated this man he had never seen because the woman hated him. "He's not going to get her back," Jeff swore in his thoughts. "If I can help her keep away from him he'll not get her

again." There was nothing possessive in the feeling which was awakening in him. His devotion to her was a completely unselfish force.

It was also the most powerful emotion Jeff had felt in all his fifty-seven years.

IV

Will Belter stopped at the farm next morning, and lingered, talking with Jeff, watching furtively for a glimpse of the woman; asked at last, point-blank, if it was true that Jeff's niece had come to visit him. He and Jeff were on the porch, outside the kitchen door; and Jeff nodded and, raising his voice, called to the woman, who was inside. He called her by his niece's name.

"Mary!"

She came slowly to the door, dreading this contact with a stranger.

"This here's Will Belter, one of our neighbors," Jeff said by way of introduction. "He lives up on the ridge beyond the village."

Will, greedy eyes upon her, said, "Howdo, ma'am?"

The woman watched him through the screen door, and answered, "How do you do?"

He said no more, and after a moment she turned back into the obscurity of the kitchen.

Will told Jeff, "She's older than I figured she'd be."

"She looks older," Jeff agreed. "That long train trip was pretty hard; and she was kind of sick."

"Ain't but twenty-two or three, is she? I'd think she was thirty, anyway."

"Twenty-four," Jeff told him.

When Will presently went on his way Jeff watched his disappearing figure with stern eyes, and there was trouble in his countenance when he turned and saw the woman standing inside the screen door and also watching.

"Who was that?"

"I'd as soon he hadn't come here," Jeff confessed. "He's a mean hound. A natural-born talebearer. Maybe we fooled him though."

She made no comment, but both understood that her desire to remain hidden was imperiled by this man's appearance. The shadow hung over them all that day. In the evening they read the paper together, found in it little that was new.

Afterwards the woman sat for a long time, thoughtfully silent, and at last said abruptly, "I think I'd better tell you why I ran away."

Jeff looked across at her in surprise, hesitated. Then: "You needn't, 'less you're a mind to," he assured her. "It don't matter a bit in the world to me."

"It is your right to know," she decided. "And—I'd like to be able to talk about it with you. It would be a relief, I believe."

Jeff nodded. "I expect that's so," he assented.

She took the paper from him, opened it to an inner page and pointed to a paragraph under a separate headline, beneath the story of her own disappearance.

"You saw this about Mr. Viles' secretary being arrested?" she asked.

Jeff looked at the paper. The paragraph recited the fact that after a preliminary hearing Franklin Gardner, secretary to Leander Viles, had been held for the grand jury on a charge of stealing gems belonging to the missing woman.

Ranney nodded. "I heard about his being arrested, in town that day," he told her.

"That was why I had to run away!" she cried, a sudden passion in her tones. "That was why I had to get away. Because it was I who saw him take them, and if they made me tell he would have to go to jail."

She was leaning across the table, resting on her elbows, her fingers twisting together; and she watched Jeff anxiously, hungrily, as though to be sure he understood.

Jeff considered what she had said for a moment, and at length asked slowly, "Saw him steal them?"

"It's a necklace," she explained desperately. "Pearls, and a pendant set with diamonds, very beautifully. Mr. Viles used to boast how much he paid for it. He was ever so proud of it, you see. He wanted to show it to a man who is on the yacht with him, and that's why he asked me to go down to the cabin and get it from the safe."

Jeff was trying to fill out the gaps in her story. "That's when you found out the necklace was gone, eh?" he inquired.

She nodded. Her words came in a rush:

"I saw Mr. Gardner come out of my cabin door, with the leather case in his hand. He

dodged away; and I suppose he thought I had not seen him. And when I opened the little safe in my cabin the necklace was gone."

Jeff grinned a little at that. "So your husband didn't get to show it off, and brag about it, after all?"

His antipathy toward this husband of hers was increasing.

The woman shook her head. "I had to go back and tell him it was gone," she assented. "And he went into one of his terrible rages. I was frightened. The doctors have warned him. So I tried to reassure him, told him that Mr. Gardner had the necklace." Her hands were tightly clasped, the knuckles white. "Oh, I shouldn't have let him know!" she cried wearily. "But I thought he must have asked Mr. Gardner to get it, must have given him the combination of the safe. Only he and I had it."

Memories silenced her; and Jeff had to prompt her with a question: "But he hadn't done that?"

"He hadn't! He hadn't!" she assented in a voice like a wail. "And when we tried to find Mr. Gardner he was gone. Gone off the yacht. Had run away. So then Mr. Viles went ashore himself, and by and by he came back, very well pleased, and said they had caught Mr. Gardner on the boat and had the necklace back again."

"Did you run away right then?" he asked, when he saw she had forgotten to go on.

She hesitated, as though choosing her words.

"No," she told him. "That was the day before. I was very unhappy even then. But until the next day I did not realize. Mr. Viles made

me see. It was just before dinner, and I met him in the main cabin. He was very expansive and very good-humored and triumphant. He spoke of Mr. Gardner. And he said this to me."

She repeated the words in a curious, parrot-like tone, as though they were engraved upon her memory. "He said: 'It's lucky you saw him, Lucia. If you hadn't actually seen him come out of your cabin with the necklace in his hands we probably couldn't send him to jail, even now!'"

Jeff was watching her attentively, waiting.

"I hadn't really understood, before, that they would send him to jail," the woman cried. "I asked Mr. Viles if he meant to do that, and begged him not to; and he just laughed at me. He said: 'He'll do ten years for this little piece of work, Lucia. And you'll be the one whose testimony will send him up. That ought to be a satisfaction to you.'"

She added, with a movement of her hands as though everything were explained, "So I ran away. There was a sailor who helped me and gave me his coat, and I ran away, and got in your car because it was raining so hard and that was the first place I saw where I could hide and be sheltered from the rain."

She broke off abruptly; and neither of them spoke for a period, while Jeff considered that which she had told him.

At length he asked gently, "You didn't want to see this here Gardner in jail?"

The woman cried passionately, "No! No! Oh, he was wrong to steal. If I had not seen him I

would never have believed— But I didn't want to put him in jail!"

"I guess you liked him pretty well," Jeff said. His tone was sympathetic, not inquisitive.

"Yes," she nodded sadly, as though she spoke of one who were dead. "Yes, I did." With a sudden confidence she added, "Why, he was my best friend. We knew each other so well. It was through him I met Mr. Viles. And then Frank had to go to Europe on business for Mr. Viles, and he was away so long, and I did not hear from him. I used to work, you know. I was a buyer in one of the New York stores. And Mr. Viles was ever so good to me, and I was tired, and he begged me so. That was how I came to marry him."

"I don't figure you ever loved him very much," Jeff suggested after an interval.

"He was good to me at first," she protested. "I think he meant to be good to me."

Silence fell upon them both once more, and this time it persisted. By and by Jeff rose from his chair, passed behind hers and touched her shoulder roughly with his heavy hand.

"I wouldn't worry too much," he said cheerfully. "I wouldn't worry too much if I was you."

She looked up at him and smiled through sudden tears. "You're good to me," she told him.

"You run along to bed," Jeff bade her. "Just forget your bothers and run along to bed."

But when she had gone upstairs the man remained for a long time in his chair beside the warm lamp, thinking over what she had told him,

supplying for himself the things she had not told. Jeff had a shrewd common sense; he was able to fill in many of the gaps, to see the truths to which even Lucia was blind. And as he thought, his eyes clouded with slow anger and his brows drew somewhat together; and when he got up at last to turn toward his bedroom there was a ferocity in his expression that no one had ever seen on Jeff Ranney's face in all his fifty-seven years. He spoke slowly, half aloud, addressing no one at all.

"Damn the man," he muttered. "I'd like to bust him a good one. It'd do him good."

Upon this wish, which had a solemnity about it almost like a prayer, Jeff went to bed.

V

Next morning, when Andy Wattles drove by the farm with Will Bissell's truck on his way to East Harbor, Jeff saw that Andy had a passenger. Will Belter was riding to town with Andy. They hailed him as they passed the barn, and Andy waved a hand in greeting as they disappeared. Jeff's perceptions were quick; it was no more than half a dozen seconds before he understood that there was menace in this move on Belter's part. His first thought was to stop the man and bring him back, but the truck was already far away along the townward road. He shook his head; there was nothing he could do. If Belter meant harm the harm was done.

But the incident put Jeff on his guard, so that

he made it his business to stay about the house that day; and when, in the early afternoon, an automobile stopped in the road before the farm he saw it and was ready. He had given the woman no warning, but she heard the machine, and came to his side in the dining room and looked out through the window. Themselves hidden, they could see the car. Three men were in it—the chauffeur, Will Belter and another. Jeff knew this other man; it needed not the woman's exclamation to inform him. Her husband had found her hiding place.

When Lucia saw him she sank weakly in a chair beside the table, said in a voice like a moan, "He's found me! He's found me!"

But for this crisis of his adventure Jeff was ready; he rose to meet the moment, gripped her shoulder.

"Just mind this," he told her swiftly. "Keep your head, ma'am, and mind what I say. You don't have to go back with him unless you want. He can't make you, ha'n't no legal way to make you; and if you don't want to go you don't have to go. I'll see he don't take you unless you say the word."

She looked up at him in swift gratitude; and he smiled at her and asked, "Now can't you take a little heart from that, ma'am?"

"He's coming," she whispered.

And Jeff looked through the window again and saw that Viles had left Belter and the chauffeur in the car he had hired in East Harbor. He himself came steadily toward the kitchen door, while the two other men watched him from the road.

Jeff and the woman heard his loud knock upon the door.

At this summons Jeff left her where she sat, her strength returning. He opened the kitchen door and faced the man he had learned to hate so blindingly that the passion intoxicated him. Yet his countenance was calm, his features all composed.

Viles was a large man without being fat; one of those men who have about them the apparent solidity of flesh which is the attribute of such dogs as Boston terriers. He may have been six feet tall, but he was inches broader across the shoulders than most men of his height. His countenance was peculiarly pink, as though rich blood coursed too near the surface of his skin. Jeff marked that he was subject to a certain shortness of breath, that his eyes were too small, and that even now a little pulse was beating in the man's throat.

Yet Viles spoke in a smooth and pleasant voice, said a jovial good afternoon and asked if this was Jeff Ranney's farm. Jeff said it was.

Viles asked, "Are you Ranney?"

"I'm Ranney," Jeff assented. He had not asked the other to come in; the screen door still separated them.

"Ah," said Viles. "I am told your niece from California is visiting you. I have a rather important bit of business to transact with her."

Jeff shook his head. "She ain't my niece," he answered frankly. "She's your wife, that had to run away from you."

His voice was stony; but at his words Viles

moved backward a step, as though under the impact of a blow, and Jeff saw the swift rage mount his cheeks in a purple flood. Then the rich man laid his hand upon the screen door, opened it.

Jeff did not move to one side, and Viles said hoarsely, "Get out of my way, you impudent fool!"

Jeff shook his head. "Listen, mister," he said softly. "This is my house. You can't come in here on your own say-so. I'm not fooling with you either. If you want to come in, you ask."

Viles lifted one clenched hand as though to sweep the other aside; and Jeff added, "I've heard enough about you so I'd like right well to mix it up with you a little bit—if you want to try anything like that. Do you?"

"I want to come in," said Viles hoarsely.

Jeff considered this for a moment, then he spoke to the woman, over his shoulder. "Do you want to see him?" he asked her.

"I suppose so," she told him wearily.

Jeff nodded. "All right, mister," he said to Viles. "Come in and take a chair."

Viles had somewhat recovered himself. He followed Jeff's indifferent back into the dining room. The woman did not rise. Jeff set a chair across the table from her, and Viles sat down in it while Jeff himself crossed to shut the door that led into the parlor, then came back and leaned against the kitchen door, watching this husband and wife, waiting for what they would say.

Viles had drawn a velvet glove over the iron hand. He asked the woman gently, "Are you all

right, my dear?" She nodded. "You are well?"

"Yes," she said slowly. "Yes, I am well."

He looked toward Jeff. "Mrs. Viles is unfortunately subject to moments of great depression," he explained courteously. "In these moments—" He stopped, arched his eyebrows meaningly, as though Jeff must understand.

"You mean she has crazy spells?" Jeff asked bluntly. Viles protested wordlessly. "She don't act crazy to me," Jeff commented. "But you may be right. She married you."

He was seeking quite deliberately to goad the other man into violence, but Viles controlled himself, said across the table to his wife, "We have been greatly concerned, my dear."

"I'm sorry," she said unconvincingly.

"It is a relief to know that you have not suffered. That scratch across your temple—"

Lucia touched with her fingers the slight wound. "It is nothing."

"You must have a good rest in bed when we get back to the yacht," he told her. There was an elephantine sportiveness in the man's demeanor. "I'm going to enjoy taking care of you."

She was silent for a moment, then slowly shook her head. "I don't think I'll go back," she told him. "I don't think I'll go back at all."

He tried to laugh easily. "You're fancying things, Lucia. It is your home. You belong there."

She faced him with a moment of decision. "If you withdraw the charge against Frank I'll go back with you, Leander."

"Withdraw it?" he asked in pretended astonishment.

"I can't bear to have him go to jail," she cried softly.

"But, my dear, the man's a thief; has betrayed the trust I reposed in him."

"I can't help it. I can't help it. I don't want him to go to jail."

Viles dropped his eyes to the oilcloth that covered the table and drummed upon it with his fingers for a moment, then turned to Jeff.

"I'd be obliged for a few moments' talk with my wife alone," he said, a sardonic note in his tone.

Jeff held his eyes for a minute, then looked toward the woman. "What shall I do, ma'am?" he asked, as though it were a matter of course that he should defer to her.

She made a weary gesture. "He has a right to that," she said.

Jeff nodded. "I'll come back in fifteen minutes, mister," he told Viles menacingly.

But Viles smiled in affable assent. "That will do finely," he agreed.

Jeff went out through the kitchen into the shed. When he was gone Viles rose and crossed to listen at the door, and heard Jeff go on into the barn. He returned to the dining room and stood above his wife, and when she did not move he gripped her chin harshly and turned her face up to his. No velvet glove upon the iron hand now. She winced a little with the pain, but made no sound. There was triumph and malice in his grin.

"Thought you could get away with it, did you, Lucia?" he asked. She said nothing. "Thought I wouldn't find you?" Still she made no sound. "Where'd you pick up this rural squire of yours?"

His tone was insult, and her continued silence seemed to anger him; he loosed her chin with a gesture as though he flung her aside; rounded the table again and sat down facing her and lighted a cigar, watching his wife through the smoke. For a long minute neither of them moved or spoke; then she lifted her head, very slowly, and met his eyes.

After an instant he laughed at her mockingly and leaned forward, gesturing with the cigar, dropping flecks of ash upon the oilcloth.

"Lucia, my dear," he said, "you haven't played fair with me. You and that tame cat of yours. And now I'm going to even the score. If you loved him you shouldn't have married me. Or having married me you should have ceased to love him. Isn't that a fair statement of the ethics of the case?"

"I didn't know, Leander," she said pitifully. "He had been so long away."

"I sent him away," the man admitted harshly. "I wanted a clear field, and got it and got you. Thought I was getting the whole of you. But when he came back I saw within six months' time that it was only the husk of you I had won."

"You're unfair!" she cried. "Frank never spoke to me—there was never anything—"

"What do I care?" Viles demanded. "Don't you suppose I know that? Don't you suppose

I've seen to it that you were both pretty closely looked after? But you loved him, and he loved you. A blind man could see that whenever you were together."

"I played fair with you," his wife pleaded. "And he did too."

"That's because you were afraid to do anything else," he assured her scornfully. "That's because you're weaklings. I'm not a weakling, my dear. In his place I'd have you. In my place I've evened the score—against both of you."

She began to sense that there was something more, something she did not know. "What?" she asked faintly. "What have you done to him?"

He puffed at his cigar, relishing it, relishing the situation. "You two blind fools! Did you think I was also blind?"

She shook her head helplessly. "What are you trying to say?"

The man swung around for a moment to look toward the road and make sure the two men who had come with him were still in the car, then leaned across the table toward her, speaking softly.

"I gave Frank the combination of your safe," he told her, grinning with delight in this moment of his triumph. "I told him to get the necklace, and take it to Boston. To have it restrung; a surprise for you. Told him not to let you see him, not to let you know. The poor fool believed me."

She was staring at him, half understanding. "He didn't steal it? He didn't steal it, then?"

"And the pretty part of it was the way I rang you in," her husband assured her mockingly. "Sending you down to the cabin at a moment when I knew he would be there. So that you might catch him in the very doing of it. So that your own testimony, my dear, might send this sweetheart of yours to jail." Her eyes widened, she was white as snow; and he threw back his head and laughed aloud. "Ah, you see it now?"

Lucia came swiftly to her feet. "He didn't steal it? He didn't steal it?" she cried. "Oh, he won't have to go to jail!"

Her husband chuckled, watching her narrowly. "Not so quick on the trigger, Lucia. Not so fast. He'll go to jail, right enough. Don't worry about that. And you'll send him there."

"But he didn't do it, Leander?" she urged pleadingly. "He's not a thief at all!"

"Of course he isn't," Viles assented. "That's the beauty of the little trap I laid."

Flames were burning in her cheeks now; her head was high. "I won't testify against him," she said swiftly. "You can't do it without me, and I won't—"

"That was why you ran away?" he asked casually. "To avoid testifying? I thought as much."

"I won't go back!" she cried. "I'll go away again!"

He smiled. "There were others who saw," he told her mildly. "Do you suppose I would be content with so loose a plan? They saw him, as well as you. Saw you also." He leaned toward her ferociously. "You'll testify, and you'll tell

the truth, or I'll convict you of perjury on your own lie, my dear. He'll go to jail certainly; and you also if you choose."

The woman was very intent, her thoughts racing. And suddenly she laughed in his face. "And I'll tell what you've just told me," she reminded him. "How long will your scheme stand then?"

He shook his head. "Oh, no, you won't, my dear."

"I will."

"There is," he said equably, "a little provision in the law of evidence which will prevent you. A wife cannot testify to any private conversation between herself and her husband. Did you suppose I would be so mad as to let you slip out of this trap so easily? The judge himself will forbid your saying one word as to what I have told you here."

She was trembling with despair. "I won't obey him!" she cried. "I'll tell anyway. The jurymen will believe me."

"If you blurt out such a thing against the order of the court you will be jailed for contempt, and the jury will be forbidden to believe you, will be told to forget what you have said." He shook his head mockingly. "No, Lucia, my dear, there's no way out. I have told you this simply in order that you might appreciate the pains I have taken." He laughed a little. "What a thoughtful husband you have!"

He was still sitting, watching her with a cruel satisfaction; but she was trembling, broken, her knees yielding beneath her. By littles she sank

into her chair, and put her head down upon her arms and wept bitterly.

Her husband watched her from across the table and puffed at his cigar.

Then Jeff Ranney opened the parlor door and came into the room. Viles, at the sound of the opening door, looked up in surprise, looked toward the kitchen through which Jeff had disappeared, looked at Jeff again.

"What were you doing there?" he demanded, coming to his feet in sudden anger.

"Listening to you talk," said Jeff equably.

"Listening? How long?"

"Oh, I came right around the house and in the front door, soon as I went out the back. Heard all you said, I guess."

Lucia had stopped crying; she lifted her head and dried her eyes and looked at Jeff. He looked down at her and smiled, a reassuring smile that gave her somehow comfort.

Viles swung toward him, cried aloud, "You dog! I'll teach you manners!"

"Yes, sir," said Jeff slowly. "I'd like right well to mix it up with you."

Viles stopped in his tracks; the man was convulsed and shaking with his own ferocious rage. "But it ain't fair to pick on you," Jeff decided; "you're such a fool."

Lucia came to her feet, turned to Jeff appealingly. "You heard what he said?"

"Yes, ma'am."

"Is it true? Can he do this? Is the law that way?"

Viles reached toward his wife, would have

taken her arm. "Lucia!" he cried. "Come away from here. Come away from here with me."

But Jeff put an arm between them, swept the big man back against the table. For an instant no one of them moved. Then Jeff said slowly, "I had a lawsuit once, so I happen to know. What he says is all right. On private conversations. But you see, this wa'n't private. I heard."

"You heard?" she whispered, not understanding.

Jeff nodded. "Sure. And I can tell anything I heard; and I guess—not sure, but it don't matter much, anyhow—I guess you can tell it, too, if I heard what he said."

He was looking down at her, had for the moment forgotten her husband. But Lucia had not forgotten, and it was Lucia's cry that warned Jeff. Viles was tugging a pistol from his pocket.

Jeff swung his right leg upward, kicked cunningly at the big man's hand. The pistol flew across the room; and Viles, roaring with pain, swung in at Jeff to grapple him. They came breast to breast, stood thus for an instant, each straining terribly, exerting utmost strength.

Then Viles' big head drooped with a little snapping jerk as all his body let go; and he slid limply through Jeff's arms to the floor. Jeff's one great hour was done.

An hour later Jeff drove Lucia back to town. He would send a man who made such matters his profession, to care for what was left of Leander Viles.

VI

A day or two later Mrs. Ranney came home from Augusta. By that time Jeff had settled into the old routine once more. His life had become again as uneventful as any life can be. Save for one or two echoes of his great adventure—when Lucia wrote that she and Gardner were to wed, and when their first baby was born—his existence continued in its old accustomed way. He lived some dozen years or so on his farm eight miles out of East Harbor. Last winter, while working in his woodlot, he became overheated and then chilled with the coming of night; and a few days later he died.